Spathodea campanulata

Scientific Name

*Spathodea campanulata* P. Beauv.

Synonyms

*Spathodea campanulata* P. Beauv. subsp. *nilotica* (Seem.) Bidgood

Family

Bignoniaceae

Common Names

African tulip, African tulip tree, African tuliptree, fireball, flame of the forest, flame tree, fountain tree, fountaintree

Origin

Native to tropical western Africa (i.e. Burundi, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, Zaire, Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo and Angola).

Cultivation

Widely cultivated as a garden and street tree. A yellow-flowered cultivar, known as yellow African tulip tree (*Spathodea campanulata* 'Aurea'), is also occasionally grown as an ornamental in Australia.

Naturalised Distribution

This species is not yet widely naturalised, but it is cultivated throughout large parts of the country as a garden plant and street tree. It has a scattered distribution in the coastal areas of central and northern Queensland and is present in the northern parts of the Northern Territory. It is also becoming naturalised on Christmas Island and in south-eastern Queensland.

Also naturalised in the Mascarenes (i.e. the Seychelles and La Réunion), Singapore, south-eastern USA (i.e. Florida) and on several Pacific islands (i.e. the Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Vanuatu, Guam, Niue, Palau, Western Samoa, Tonga and Hawaii).

Habitat

A tree that invades abandoned agricultural land, roadsides, waterways, disturbed sites, waste areas, forest margins and disturbed rainforests in tropical and sub-tropical regions. It favours wetter habitats, and is especially common along creeks and gullies.

Habit

A large upright tree (growing up to 25 m tall) with a spreading crown and a slightly butressed trunk.

Distinguishing Features

- a large tree with large compound leaves arranged in pairs along the branches.
- its large and very showy flowers (10-12 cm long) are borne in clusters at the tips of the branches.
- these flowers are orange-red, somewhat tulip-shaped, and have yellowish wrinkled margins.
- its large elongated capsules (up to 30 cm long) resemble pods and split open to release numerous papery seeds.

Stems and Leaves
The branches are thick and marked with small whitish-coloured corky spots (i.e. lenticels). Younger branches vary from being almost hairless (i.e. sub-glabrous) to having a sparse covering of small hairs (i.e. puberulent).

The large leaves (up to 50 cm long) are compound (i.e. pinnate) with 7-17 leaflets. These leaves are usually oppositely arranged along the stems and are borne on stalks (i.e. petioles) up to 6 cm long. The leaflets (up to 15 cm long and 7.5 cm wide) are broadly oval (i.e. elliptic) or egg-shaped in outline (i.e. ovate) and have entire margins. They have a sparse covering of soft hairs (i.e. they are puberulent) and the extension of the leaf stalk (i.e. the rachis) is usually covered in brownish coloured hairs. At the base of each leaflet there are usually two or three tiny raised structures (i.e. glands).

**Flowers and Fruit**

The large and very showy flowers are arranged in dense clusters (8-10 cm long) at the tips of the branches (i.e. in terminal racemes) on stalks (i.e. peduncles) up to 10 cm long. Individual flowers are borne on short stalks (i.e. pedicels) that are covered in brownish-coloured hairs. These flowers have sepals that are fused into a horn-shaped structure (i.e. calyx tube) that splits along one side as the flowers open. This distinctive horn-shaped calyx is curved upward, somewhat ribbed, and brownish in colour (about 5 cm long). The reddish-orange coloured petals (10-12 cm long) are also fused together (i.e. into a corolla tube) and are shaped somewhat like a tulip flower (i.e. they are tubular). The mouth of the flower is about 7 cm across and has several indistinct lobes with crinkled (i.e. crisped) margins that are yellowish in colour. Each flower also has four stamens with large dark brown anthers (about 15 mm long) that are borne on stalks (i.e. filaments) about 5 cm long. They also have a long yellow style (8 cm long) topped with a reddish stigma. Flowering occurs throughout the year, but usually peaks during spring.

The large and elongated capsules (17-30 cm long and 3.5-5 cm wide) resemble pods. They are slightly flattened and turn from green to brown in colour as they mature. When mature they split open and release about 500 papery seeds. These seeds are very light and surrounded by a see-through (i.e. translucent) membranous wing.

**Reproduction and Dispersal**

This plant reproduces mostly by seeds, which are light and usually released from a significant height. Larger trees may also spread via root suckers, particularly when they are damaged.

Seeds are most commonly wind-dispersed, but they may also be spread by water (if plants are growing along waterways) and in dumped garden waste.

**Environmental Impact**

African tulip tree (Spathodea campanulata) is regarded as a significant environmental weed in Queensland, the Northern Territory, and on Christmas Island. It is also regarded as a potential environmental weed or “sleeper weed” in northern New South Wales and other parts of northern Australia.

This species is also listed in the Global Invasive Species Database (GISD), and is regarded to be among the top 100 of the world's worst invasive alien Species.

**Legislation**

This species is declared under legislation in the following states and territories:

- Queensland: Class 3 - this species is primarily an environmental weed and a pest control notice may be issued for land that is, or is adjacent to, an environmentally significant area (throughout the entire state). It is also illegal to sell a declared plant or its seed in this state.

- Western Australia: Unassessed - this species is declared in other states or territories and is prohibited until assessed via a weed risk assessment (throughout the entire state).

**Management**

For information on the management of this species see the following resources:

- the Biosecurity Queensland Fact Sheet on this species, which is available online at [http://www.daff.qld.gov.au](http://www.daff.qld.gov.au).

**Similar Species**

African tulip tree (Spathodea campanulata) is very distinctive, and is rarely confused with other species.
Fact sheets are available from Department of Employment, Economic Development and Innovation (DEEDI) service centres and our Customer Service Centre (telephone 13 25 23). Check our website at www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au to ensure you have the latest version of this fact sheet. The control methods referred to in this fact sheet should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, DEEDI does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

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